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ABSTRACT

Long used in the professional fields of business and law, cases and case methods of teaching represent a relatively new and promising approach in the education of teachers. This digest, organized into two sections, presents definitions of cases and case methods, explores the purposes of using case studies, and suggests avenues for further research into the effectiveness of using cases in teacher education. Cases are descriptive research documents, often presented in narrative form, that are based on real-life situations or events. Case methods may include large and small group discussions, role playing, written analysis, or team-based discussions. In teacher education, case purpose falls into three categories: cases as exemplars; cases as opportunities to practice analysis, the assimilation of differing perspectives, and contemplation of action; and cases as stimulants to personal reflection. To develop greater knowledge about cases and case methods, it is suggested that the teacher education community: (1) assess more fully the use of cases and develop a deeper understanding of the effects of variations in use; (2) be clear about intended outcomes; (3) focus on the influence of case-based instruction on teacher and student performance in classrooms; (4) examine the differences berween video, written, and a combination of video and written cases in hypermedia format; (5) explore variations in method; and (6) examine the role and practice of the instructor. (LL)

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CASES, CASE METHODS, AND THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATORS

ERIC DIGEST November 1996

by

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Cases, Case Methods, and the Professional Development of Educators

Katherine K. Merseth

Cases and case methods of teaching represent a relatively new and promising approach in the education of teachers. Though long used in other professional fields (i.e., business and law), the current interest of teacher educators in this pedagogy is due in part to a growing interest in the development of teacher knowledge and cognition and an acknowledgment of the complexities of teaching (Merseth, 1991). This Digest will present definitions of cases and case methods, explore the purposes of using case studies, and suggest avenues for further research into the effectiveness of using case in teacher education.

Definitions

What are "cases" and "case methods?" Since teacher educators use different terms and definitions, it is important to be clear about the meaning of these terms and definitions in order to develop a better understanding of their use and potential.

One common definition suggests that a *case* is a descriptive research document, often presented in narrative form, that is based on a real-life situation or event. It attempts to convey a balanced, multidimensional representation of the context, participants, and reality of the situation. Cases are created explicitly for discussion and seek to include sufficient detail and information to elicit active analysis and interpretation by users with differing perspectives. This definition reaffirms three essential elements of cases: (a) they are real, (b) they rely on careful research and study, and (c) they foster the development of multiple perspectives by users. The emphasis on reality-based cases is important for teacher education because it enables students of teaching to explore, analyze, and examine representations of actual classrooms.

Collections of cases are now appearing in teacher education casebooks, which also include discussion questions and instructor notes. Some are generically organized, covering many aspects of instruction, while others target specific audiences, such as intern or mentor teachers or high school students, or specific themes, such as multicultural education or assessment.

Closely related to the definition of cases are the many ways that cases are used. *Case methods* are employed, for instance, to frame conversations between mentors and novices, as stimulants to reflection, as techniques to enrich field experiences, as tools for professional evaluation, or to orient individuals to particular ways of thinking. Case methods may include large and small group discussions, role playing, written analysis, or team-based discussions.

To structure case discussions, the discussion leader plays a very important role—guiding, probing, directing, giving feedback, or sometimes simply observing the exchanges and contributions among the class members. The purpose of these discussions is to develop individual skills of observation, analysis, action taking, and assessment. Indeed, case discussions often help students understand that the analyses of most problems in education depend on the particular perspective of the problem solver.

In teacher education, case purpose falls into three categories: (a) cases as exemplars; (b) cases as opportunities to practice analysis, the assimilation of differing perspectives, and contemplation of action; and (c) cases as stimulants to personal reflection (Merseth, 1996). Cases as *exemplars* emphasize the theoretical and give priority to general, propositional knowledge. Their purpose is to develop knowledge of a particular theory or to build new theories. Using cases as exemplars also can be used to honor best practice or to make effective teaching more public and more available for analysis and review (Sykes & Bird, 1992).

Cases also can be used to *practice* decision making and problem solving. Here, case materials can help teachers "think like a teacher" (Shulman, 1992; Wassermann, 1994) by presenting situations from which theory emerges. The cases portray problematic situations that require problem identification and analysis, decision making, and action definition. This use of cases works well with the conception of teaching as a complex, messy, context-specific activity.

Finally, a third purpose of cases is to *stimulate personal reflection.* Here, the emphasis is on introspection and the development of personal professional knowledge. Teacher educators who use cases written as self-reports of personal experiences, suggest that they are a powerful means to develop habits and techniques of reflection (Kleinfeld, 1992; Richert, 1991), as well as a stimulus to analytical thinking.

The Future of Cases and Case Methods

The clarion calls for the use of cases and case methods far exceed the volume and quality of empirical research specific to cases and case methods in teacher education. Will cases and case methods become standard pedagogy in teacher education in the twenty-first century? The answer is unclear because the research base about cases and case methods is small, though growing (Colbert, Trimble, & Desberg, 1996).

To develop greater knowledge about cases and case methods, the teacher education community must assess more fully the use of cases and develop a deeper understanding of the effects of variations in use. This charge is an ambitious one because understanding various uses of cases requires a clear articulation of purpose. As a first step, researchers must be clear about intended outcomes. Are they looking for effects on teacher cognition or on personal beliefs and feelings? Another area of important research must focus on the influence of case-based instruction on teacher and student performance in classrooms.

The medium and the content of cases also offer rich areas for investigation. What is known about the difference between video, written, and a combination

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of video and written cases in hypermedia format (Merseth & Lacey, 1993)? And what do teachers learn from cases about mathematics or special education?

A different line of research should explore variations in method. Basically, this work would investigate how, where, when, and by whom cases are used. In the teacher education curriculum, is it more productive to consider five cases set in the same context about five different topics or five cases about the same topic in five different settings? And what do we know about the impact of cases delivered through CD-ROM or hypermedia format? Important questions also exist about the role and practice of the instructor.

The existence of an active research and development agenda about cases in teacher education is exciting. If teacher educators pursue their work with the objective of first understanding more completely the elements of case-based pedagogy—namely the materials and the methods—and then engage in more complicated research that explores the interaction of these elements with students, significant contributions may be realized.

Conclusion

Cases and case methods of instruction offer a new pedagogical method for teacher education programs. The growing interest in cases, the early results of empirical research about the materials and the methods, and the potential for further research and development outline great opportunities for those who wish to use it to pursue a deeper understanding of the process of learning to teach.

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